

Message Text

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CINCPAC HONOLULU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 11099

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, SHUM, VC

SUBJ: VIET-NAM: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AMONG THE RELIGIONS

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SUMMARY: IN SAIGON AN QUANT BUDDHISTS, REPORTEDLY LED BEHIND THE SCENES BY THICH TRI QUANG, CONTINUE TO PRESENT CHALLENGES TO THE VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES, WHO HAVE RETALIATED BY ARRESTING CERTAIN KEY LEADERS. THE END OF THE CONFRONTATION IS REPORTEDLY NOT YET IN SIGHT. THE SRV APPARENTLY HOPES TO UNIFY ORGANIZATIONS OF NORTHERNERS AND SOUTHERNERS PRACTICING THE SAME RELIGION BUT FINDS THE STEP A DIFFICULT ONE TO ACCOMPLISH. END SUMMARY.

1. INTRODUCTION. BECAUSE VIET-NAM'S RELIGIONS REPRESENT GROUPS OF VARYING DEGREES OF ORGANIZATION WHICH RE SOMEWHAT OUTSIDE THE ABSOLUTE CONTROL OF SRV AUTHORITIES--DESPITE THE
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LATTER'S CREATION OF FRONT COMMITTEES DESIGNED TO BE THE PARTY-LINE SPOKESMEN OF THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS BODIES--THEY MERIT WATCHING BECAUSE THEY ARE POTENTIALLY CAPABLE OF ORGANIZING PASSIVE AND EVEN ACTIVE RESISTANCE TO THE COMMUNISTS IF THEY SO CHOOSE. WHILE THOSE GROUPS IN THE NORTH--TO THE EXTENT THAT THEY ARE STILL ACTIVE--PRESENT LITTLE EVIDENCE TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD OF ACTIVE OPPOSITION TO

AUTHORITY AFTER SURVIVING UNDER THE COMMUNISTS FOR OVER TWO DECADES, THOSE IN THE SOUTH CONTINUE TO BE MISTRUSTED BY THE COMMUNIST AUTHORITIES.

2. IN THIS MESSAGE WE REPORT THE OBSERVATIONS OF SOME RECENT VISITORS TO VIET-NAM WHOM THE EMBASSY CONSIDERS TO BE BOTH KNOWLEDGEABLE AND PERCEPTIVE, ON THE SITUATION OF THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE SOUTH. THIS IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY BUT, RATHER A REVIEW OF SELECTED DEVELOPMENTS. NEITHER THE CAO DAI NOR THE HOA HAO ARE INCLUDED, BUT IT SHOULD BE MENTIONED THAT THE LATTER CONTINUE TO POSE A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT PROBLEM FOR THE AUTHORITIES, CAUSING THEM SEVERAL MONTHS AGO TO MAKE A NEW WAVE OF ARRESTS OF SOME MEMBERS OF THAT SECT WHO WERE ACTIVELY RESISTING THE REGIME, ACCORDING TO REFUGEES ARRIVING IN THAILAND.

3. AN QUANG. WHEREAS DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF COMMUNIST RULE IN THE SOUTH IT WAS CATHOLIC OPPOSITION TO THE REGIME OF WHICH WE HEARD MOST (EXCEPT FOR HOA HAO-CAO DAI RESISTANCE), THE AN QUANG BUDDHISTS NOW APPEAR TO BE IN THE FOREFRONT. THE REPORTED IMMOLATIONS IN THE CAN THO AREA IN NOVEMBER, 1975, WHICH WERE, TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, DUE TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES' SEIZURE OF A PAGODA ON THE EXCUSE THAT IT WAS CONSTRUCTED ON STATE LAND, RESULTED IN A PROTEST FROM AN QUANG AT THAT TIME AND A CONSTANT REFUSAL SINCE THEN TO LET THE MATTER DIE. THIS WAS FOLLOWED IN JANUARY, 1977, BY GOVERNMENT CRITICISM OF AN QUANG FOR THE CHURCH'S REFUSAL TO SEAT COMMUNISTS AT A CONFERENCE AND, APPARENTLY, BUDDHIST-DIRECTED PROTESTS IN THE STREETS OVER GOVERNMENT POLICIES. IN MARCH NUN NHU HIEN COMMITTED SUICIDE
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TO PROTEST THE STATE'S TAKEOVER OF HER ORPHANAGE, GIVING AN QUANG ANOTHER BASIS OVER WHICH TO ATTACK THE GOVERNMENT.

4. AT THE BEGINNING OF APRIL, WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE AN QUANG INSTITUTE SUBMITTED A STRONGLY-WORDED STATEMENT TO THE GOVERNMENT, ACCUSING IT OF PURPOSELY "HUMILIATING THE SECT" AND CALLING ON BUDDHISTS TO PROTEST "TO SAFEGUARD DIGNITY AND DOCTRINE". REPORTEDLY SIGNING ON BEHALF OF AN QUANG WAS A VICE RECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE, THICH QUANG DO, RECTOR THICH TRI THU (PERHAPS CONVENIENTLY) VISITING HUE THAT DAY. THE SRV REPLIED WITH INTENSE CRITICISM AT A MEETING OF BUDDHISTS IN SAIGON ON APRIL 7, WARNING AN QUANG THAT VIOLATORS OF THE LAW MUST BE PUNISHED (REF A).

5. AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME SOME AN QUANG LEADERS WERE ARRESTED, THE NUMBER UNCERTAIN BUT PROBABLY AS MANY AS A DOZEN, SUPPORTING THE REPORT IN REF B. A VISITOR WHO SPOKE IN MID-APRIL WITH SAIGON PARTY COMMITTEE MEMBER AND STRONGMAN IN THIS AFFAIR, DUONG DINH THAO, WAS TOLD THAT THE GOVERNMENT

HAD ARRESTED IMPORTANT BUT LESSER AN QUANG OFFICIALS. THAO SAID IT COULD HAVE ACTED MORE HARSHLY AND ARRESTED MORE PEOPLE BUT HAD NOT TOUCHED THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT--THICH QUANG DO AND THE WELL-KNOWN ACTIVIST THICH TRI QUANG--SO AS NOT TO WORSEN THE SITUATION. A CHURCH GROUP WITH EXCELLENT CONTACTS AMONG VIETNAMESE INSIDE VIET-NAM AND ELSEWHERE HAS LEARNED, IT BELIEVES AUTHORITATIVELY, THAT THICH QUANG DO IS NOW AMONG THOSE ARRESTED.

6. THE SOURCE WHO MET THAO ALSO INTERVIEWED IN SAIGON MEMBERS OF THE BUDDHIST FRONT ORGANIZATION, THE LIAISON COMMITTEE OF PATRIOTIC BUDDHISTS, SOME OF WHOM SPOKE VERY FRANKLY. ONE STATEMENT THEY REPORTEDLY MADE WAS THAT "ONLY" 40 PERCENT OF THE BUDDHISTS IN THE SOUTH OPPOSE THE GOVERNMENT. ANOTHER, ATTRIBUTED TO THE COMMITTEE'S ONLY THERAVADA BUDDHIST MONK WHO SEEMED TO TAKE GLEE IN DISCUSSING THE AN QUANG PROBLEM TO THE EMBARRASSMENT OF HIS MAHAYANA BUDDHIST COLLEAGUES, SAID FLATLY THAT THICH CONFIDENTIAL

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QUANG DO WAS THE FRONT MAN IN THE AFFAIR FOR AN QUANG BUT THAT THICH TRI QUANG WAS THE "EMINENCE GRISE" WHO WAS MASTERMINDING IT BEHIND THE SCENES.

7. NEITHER OF OUR TWO PRINCIPAL SOURCES ON THIS SUBJECT HAVE HEARD OF ANY IMMOLATIONS SINCE THE ARRESTS (REF B), ALTHOUGH THEY DID NOT DISCOUNT THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOME TOOK PLACE. IN THIS CONNECTION, WE NOTE A REUTERS ITEM OF MAY 20 FROM PARIS REPORTING LETTER OF VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST PEACE DELEGATION BASED IN PARIS TO SRV PRIMIN PHAM VAN DONG CLAIMING THAT AN QUANG WAS RAIDED AND ARRESTS MADE ON APRIL 6, WITH ADDITIONAL ARRESTS OCCURRING IN "SEVERAL PROVINCES". IT NOTED THAT 126 MONKS AND NUNS WERE PREPARED TO IMMOLATE THEMSELVES "TO DEMAND AN END TO THE PERSECUTION OF BUDDHISTS AND BUDDHISM IN VIET-NAM." OBVIOUSLY THE AFFAIR IS NOT AT AN END.

8. SOUTHERN CATHOLICISM. ONE HEARS LITTLE TALK NOW OF ACTIVE CATHOLIC RESISTANCE TO THE VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE OCCASIONALLY EXAMPLES OF PASSIVE RESISTANCE (E.G., HELPING SOMEONE TO ESCAPE THE COUNTRY) CONTINUING TO BE REPORTED. SAIGON ARCHBISHOP NGUYEN VAN BINH DEMONSTRATED BY HIS ENTHUSIASM IN DISCUSSING VIET-NAM'S NEW SITUATION WITH A VISITOR LAST MONTH JUST HOW HARD HE IS TRYING TO BE REVOLUTIONARY. HE OBSERVED THAT HE HAD MAINTAINED CONTACTS WITH THENFL QUIETLY SINCE 1964. HE EVEN CONFIDED THAT HE HAS ASKED THE GOVERNMENT TO FURNISH HIM SOME LECTURERS ON MARXISM-LENINISM WHOM HE COULD INSERT INTO THE SEMINARIES TO TEACH COURSES BUT THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS NOT REPLIED.

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9. ASKED ABOUT THE STORIES THAT PRIESTS HAVE BEEN JAILED,
BINH DESCRIBED "TWO EXAMPLES" OF THOSE NOW IMPRISONED. ONE IS
FATHER TRAN HUU THANH AND THE OTHER THE PRIEST CONVICTED OF
LEADING THE VINH SON CHURCH INCIDENT OF FEBRUARY, 1976. AS THE
EMBASSY REPORTED IN REF C, THE NAME OF THE PRIEST CONVICTED
WAS DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF THE ONE ARRESTED AT THE TIME,NOTING
THAT THE LATTER APPARENTLY DIED SHORTLY AFTER HIS ARREST, AS
A CONSEQUENCE OF BEATINGS HE HAD RECEIVED.

10. SOUTHERN PROTESTANTISM. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF UNKNOWNNS
ABOUT THE STATE OF PROTESTANTISM IN THE SOUTH, WHICH IS UNITED
AS THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH. PROTESTANTS OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY HAVE
NO RECENT NEWS ABOUT THE STATUS OF THEIR CHURCH IN THE HIGHLANDS,
IN PARTICULAR. A PROTESTANT GROUP WHICH VISITED VIET-NAM TWO
MONTHS AGO TO DISCUSS RELIEF MATTERS FOUND ITSELF UNABLE TO
OBSERVE THE DEGREE TO WHICH PROTESTANTISM WAS CONTINUING, EVEN
IN SAIGON. THERE, IT HOPED TO SEE ONG VAN HUYEN, A MAN OF STANDING
WHOM PROTESTANTS HAD MADE THEIR HEAD IN LATE 1975-EARLY 1976,
REPLACING A HARDLINER, HOPING THAT HUYEN'S CHAIRMANSHIP WOULD
BRING ABOUT BETTER RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT. INSTEAD,
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AUTHORITIES TROTTED OUT AN UNKNOWN WHOM THEY INTRODUCED AS A
LEADING PROTESTANT, A WEAK REED WHO WAS OBVIOUSLY SPEAKING

FOR THE GOVERNMENT. THE GROUP WAS UNABLE TO LEARN WHERE HUYEN WAS.

11. COMMENT ON UNIFICATION. WE EXPECT THERE WILL BE FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN AN QUANG AND THE GOVERNMENT, AND THE SITUATION WARRANTS CONTINUED WATCHING. HOW FAR EVEN AN QUANG WOULD DARE TO GO IS OPEN TO SERIOUS QUESTION, HOWEVER. VISITORS TO VIET-NAM REPORT THAT THERE IS A DESIRE IN HANOI TO UNIFY THE SOUTHERN ELEMENTS OF A RELIGION WITH ITS NORTHERN COUNTERPART. ALTHOUGH FROM AN SRV POINT OF VIEW IT WOULD MAKE SENSE AS ANOTHER WAY OF INCREASING NORTHERN AND, THEREFORE, PARTY GOVERNMENT, CONTROL OVER THE SOUTHERNERS, IT WOULD BE A DELICATE OPERATION. ORGANIZING ALL THE SOUTHERN BUDDHIST SECTS WITH THEIR NORTHERN COUNTERPARTS COULD RESULT IN A DANGEROUS UNION OF SOUTHERNERS. UNIFYING ALL THE CATHOLICS COULD ALSO RESULT IN THE CREATION OF A STRONG FORCE, ALTHOUGH AT LEAST ONE PERSON HAS BEEN TOLD THAT SOUTHERN CATHOLICS WOULD NOT WANT TO UNITED WITH THE NORTHERNERS BECAUSE THE LATTER ARE "TOO CONSERVATIVE"

.
HANOI VNA NOTED APRIL 29 THE STATEMENT OF PASTOR HOANG KIM PHUC, PRESIDENT OF THE (NORTHERN) VIET-NAM PROTESTANTS' ASSOCIATION, THAT PROTESTANTS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY WOULD SOON MERGE. PHUC TOLD THE VISITING PROTESTANT DELEGATION THE SAME THING EARLIER, STATING THAT THE NORTHERNERS WOULD PROVIDE THE LEADERSHIP IN SUCH A UNION. THE MEMBERS OF THE DELEGATION REPORTEDLY EXPRESSED THEIR AMAZEMENT THAT THE NORTHERN PROTESTANTS WOULD DARE TO LEAD SOUTHERN PROTESTANTS, WHO WERE TWENTY TIMES GREATER IN NUMBER. IN GENERAL, THEN, FUTURE UNIFICATION OF SOUTHERNERS AND NORTHERNERS OF THE SAME RELIGIOUS FAITHS IS MUCH MORE EASILY TALKED ABOUT THAN ACTUALLY UNDERTAKEN.
WHITEHOUSE

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